



Statistics

A Matter of Trust

A Consultation Document

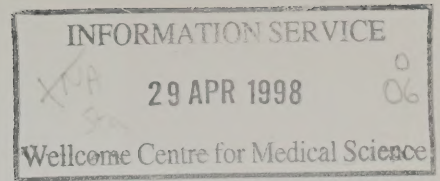
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Statistics A Matter of Trust

A Consultation Document

Presented to Parliament by

the Economic Secretary to the Treasury

by Command of her Majesty, February 1998

Contents



Preface by the Prime Minister iv

Foreword by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury v

1. Introduction 1

2. Background 4

3. The Need for Change 8

4. The Scope of Official Statistics - Towards National Statistics 10

5. Accountability and Governance 12

6. Location of Responsibilities 20

7. The Maintenance of Professional Standards across all
Statistical Work in Government 22

8. Statistics and Devolution 23

Annex A: Historical Development of Official Statistics 26

Annex B: Current Framework for Official Statistics 29

Annex C: United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics 37

Annex D: Administrative Frameworks for Statistics in Other Countries 39

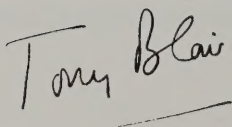
Preface by the Prime Minister

This Government is pledged to clean up and modernise politics. We want a new relationship between Government and citizens, based on openness and trust.

We are committed to a comprehensive programme of constitutional reform. The elements are:

- Freedom of Information and an independent national statistical service
- new rights for citizens with the incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights
- a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly giving the people of Scotland and Wales more control over their own affairs within the United Kingdom
- an elected Mayor and new strategic authority for London with more accountability in the regions of England
- a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons
- reform of the House of Lords.

This Green Paper marks a further significant step forward in the achievement of our proposals. It sets out ideas for taking forward the pledge in one very specific area - that of official statistics - and is intended to stimulate a debate to which I hope you will contribute.



TONY BLAIR

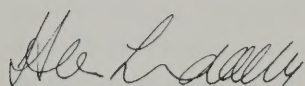


Foreword by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury

Public confidence in official statistics has for too long been clouded by concerns about their integrity. The Government is committed to changing this. Official statistics are used by people to judge whether Government is delivering on its promises, and they inform decisions that affect everybody's daily lives. To fulfil these roles well, official statistics must above all be trustworthy and be seen to be trustworthy.

As Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I am acutely aware of the importance of timely, trusted and relevant official statistics. I am also the Minister responsible for the Office for National Statistics, which not only is a major producer of statistics itself but also has a coordinating role across official statistics generally. I am therefore pleased to be able to present in this Green Paper the Government's ideas for enhancing integrity, both actual and perceived, through improvements to their overall framework.

Trustworthy and well respected statistics provide the cornerstone to efficient and accountable Government. We need an open debate on the statistical service that is necessary for the future. I therefore urge everybody who has a contribution to make to the debate to seize the opportunity which this Green Paper offers.



HELEN LIDDELL MP



Chapter 1: Introduction



1.1. Reliable official statistics are a cornerstone of democracy and are essential to good public management and accountability. The public, government and Parliament all have a legitimate interest in statistics which provide an objective account of the economy and society, both over time and geographically. Such statistics offer a window on the work and performance of government itself. They also help government in the formulation and evaluation of policies and in the management of services for which they are responsible. It is the responsibility of government to provide reliable official statistics and to ensure the public has confidence in them.

1.2. The current range of UK official statistics is wide, covering all key areas of national life. However, public confidence in the integrity of official statistics has been called into question. Reports by a number of organisations and bodies, including Parliament and the Royal Statistical Society have raised concerns about the quality of statistics and their degree of freedom from political interference. Surveys indicate that the public shares this concern.

1.3. In recent years, a number of changes have been made. Publication of the Official Statistics Code of Practice in 1995 was a major step forward in consolidating consistent professional standards across the Government Statistical Service (GSS). The creation of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 1996 through the merger of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) established, through its Framework Document, a body with a greater degree of independence from the political process than either the CSO or the OPCS had previously.

1.4. However, while the Government welcomes these changes, the popular perception is that they have not gone far enough, and it is clear from the media and from other evidence that concerns remain over the integrity of official statistics, both generally and in specific areas - for example, unemployment statistics, crime statistics, hospital waiting lists and measures of inflation. The Government therefore believes that the time has come to consider more fundamental changes.

The Goal

1.5. The Government's goal is to enhance the integrity, both actual and perceived, of official statistics. This has two aspects: the assured quality of official statistics, and freedom from political interference in the compilation and presentation of statistics:



- *quality* needs to be assured. Official statistics must be sufficiently accurate and reliable for the purposes for which they are required. Efficiency is important here, too, since quality has to be achieved within what is affordable - both in terms of direct cost and in terms of minimising burdens on businesses and other data suppliers;
- the production and presentation of official statistics needs to be *free from political interference*, and to be seen as such, so that the professional objectivity and impartiality of statistics is assured. Priorities must be driven by the requirements of all users - Parliament, government and the wider community.

1.6. Whether this goal has been achieved can be judged against the following criteria:

- (i) producing statistics which are based on high, professional standards and are acknowledged to be honest, dependable and accessible;
- (ii) producing statistics which are relevant and focused on meeting the needs and aspirations of users generally. They should inform Parliament, government and people generally about the state of the nation and provide a window on the work and performance of government, allowing the impact of government policies and actions to be assessed. They should help government conduct its business;
- (iii) producing statistics effectively and efficiently, taking account of the Government's Better Regulation commitment¹ to minimise burdens on business and in line with international best practice;
- (iv) safeguarding the professional integrity of those who collect and present official statistics.

1.7. The integrity of statistics is an important issue of wide public concern. Accordingly, as a first step, the Government is issuing this Green Paper to stimulate a wide-ranging debate. The Green Paper has these main parts:

- the historical, current and international context (Chapter 2)
- the case for change (Chapter 3)
- the scope of official statistics - towards "National Statistics" (Chapter 4)
- options for improving the framework for accountability and governance (Chapter 5)
- the location of responsibilities (Chapter 6)

¹ Labour's Business Manifesto: Equipping Britain for the Future. 1997.

- the maintenance of professional standards across all statistical work in Government (Chapter 7)
- the implications of devolution (Chapter 8).

Timetable

1.8. The Green Paper poses a number of specific questions at the end of chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The views of everyone are welcome, either on these or on related issues and questions. They should be sent to:

Nigel Edison
Office for National Statistics
D4/6, 1 Drummond Gate
London SW1V 2QQ.
Fax: 0171 533 6219.
E-mail: green.paper@ons.gov.uk.

1.9. This Green Paper can also be found on the Internet at The Stationery Office web site www.official-documents.co.uk, where it includes an e-mail response facility. This site is also directly accessible from the ONS and the Treasury web sites (www.ons.gov.uk and www.hm-treasury.gov.uk).

1.10. The Government may wish to publish the replies to this consultation. Unless confidentiality is requested, it will be assumed that respondents would be content for this to happen.

1.11. The consultation period will extend until 31 May 1998 to give adequate time for public discussion but with a firm date for matters then to be taken forward. In the interim, the Government will organise seminars and other events to help focus debate. Up to date information on these events can be obtained from the ONS web site, referred to above, or can be obtained through Nigel Edison at the above address, or by telephone on 0171 533 6210. But the Government would also encourage other interested parties to consider holding similar events. If you are arranging a meeting to discuss the Green Paper and would like someone to attend to hear the debate and answer questions, please contact Nigel Edison through one of the appropriate routes shown above.

1.12. Once the consultation period is over, the replies will be drawn together and detailed proposals prepared. The intention is to report as soon as possible after 31 May.

1.13. The Government believes that much progress can be made without legislation to enshrine a new framework for statistical work in government. But it will consider the case for legislation if appropriate and necessary. However, Parliamentary time is limited and the time available for this legislation would need to be assessed against other priorities.



Chapter 2: Background

2.1. This chapter briefly sets out the historical development of statistical work in government, the current framework for this work, and describes the international setting. Further details are set out in annexes A-D.

A Brief History

2.2. Statistics have been collected and published by government for centuries. Statistical work in the UK has traditionally been carried out by statistical units attached to government departments. Lack of coordination resulted in inconsistencies in statistics produced by various departments and in 1941 the Central Statistical Office (CSO) was established to ensure greater coherence of statistical information across government. In the late 1960s, a wider reorganisation of statistical work took place, which involved the creation of two new offices to provide a service across government for compiling statistics from businesses (the Business Statistics Office) and households (the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys). The Government Statistical Service (GSS) was also established to improve coordination in the management of government statistics and to develop a cadre of professional statisticians across government. The CSO was given responsibility for the co-ordination machinery.

2.3. A change took place in the early 1980s when a review conducted by Sir Derek Rayner concluded that statistical information should primarily be collected to satisfy the needs of Government rather than primarily for publication. This led to a reduced level of service during the 1980s.

2.4. With growing concerns about the quality of official statistics, a government review led to changes in the organisation of the Government Statistical Service in 1989, including the transfer of the Business Statistics Office and some other statistical responsibilities to the CSO.

2.5. These changes, however, did little to allay public concerns about the integrity of statistics. In 1990, the Royal Statistical Society published a critical report, *Counting with Confidence*, about the governance of the statistical service. These concerns were partly addressed when, in 1991, the CSO was given Executive Agency status. Its Framework Document set out clearly the respective roles of the Director and of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and also marked a clear departure from the Rayner doctrine by putting the focus on the quality of service provided to customers both in and outside government. The White Paper on Open Government in 1993 provided final confirmation that the Rayner doctrine had been overturned, spelling out that official statistics were required also for the citizen. Then, in 1995, the Head of the GSS published the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*

which set out the principles and practices which should govern all official statistical work, including setting out the statistician's responsibilities for determining when and how statistics should be released. The same year, responsibility for labour market statistics transferred from the former Employment Department to CSO. In 1996, the CSO and the OPCS merged to form the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which brought together within a single organisation much of the collection, primary analysis and publication of statistics in government.

2.6. Further details are at annex A.

Current Framework for Official Statistics


2.7. The GSS is the major provider of official statistics in the United Kingdom. It offers a wide range of statistical products and services to government, Parliament and the wider community. Around 4,700 staff are employed in the GSS, with approximately half in the ONS and the remainder in other government departments and agencies: the Director of ONS is Head of the GSS. In addition, responsibility for some official statistics lies outside the GSS, for example with other professionals in government, the Bank of England and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

2.8. Official statistical work covers a wide range of tasks including the collection, analysis and publication of statistics, statistical support for departmental and agency functions, and policy-related work for Ministers. It covers all areas of national life - for example, the economy, employment, population, crime, education and health.

2.9. Official statistics are made available in a wide range of formats and through a wide range of media including books, disks and on-line databases. Compendium publications from the GSS draw together information on a particular topic from a range of sources with the aim of offering a clear, objective and impartial statistical picture to help inform debate and decision-making. The release of statistics is covered in the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*. Properly documented data sets are made available, subject to safeguarding confidentiality, to enable others to undertake their own analyses. Statistics are made available as soon as processing has reached the stage that the statistics are fit for purpose. Key statistics are made available to all users at the same time, with limited exceptions on a strict need-to-know basis. Information about exceptions is publicly available. Release dates for key statistics are pre-announced.

Accountability and Governance

2.10. Each department is responsible for its own statistical programmes. These are prepared by statistical staff within a policy and resources



framework determined by the appropriate departmental Minister. User and supplier interests are taken into account through a range of consultation mechanisms including:

- the Statistics Advisory Committee, which advises the Director of ONS on the work of ONS and on his responsibilities as Head of the GSS;
- other formal advisory bodies (for example, the Business Advisory Group on the Census; the Education Data Advisory Panel);
- less formal discussions with representative organisations such as user groups and trade associations.

2.11. Ministers are responsible for approving the work programmes and providing appropriate professional freedom to staff to prepare and implement these programmes. The *Official Statistics Code of Practice* sets out good practice for producers of statistics in this respect. ONS, being an Agency, has a Framework Document, in which roles and responsibilities are formally specified. (Key extracts are contained in annex B, which sets out the current framework for official statistics in more detail.)

2.12. The Head of the GSS has no management responsibility for the work of the GSS outside ONS, but is responsible for promoting the co-ordination and integrity of official statistics across government. These responsibilities are exercised in the main through maintenance of the *Official Statistics Code of Practice* setting out the principles and practices for all those involved in official statistics, through the specific roles and responsibilities of Heads of Profession for Statistics within Departments, and through a system of interdepartmental committees. The Head of the GSS provides an annual report to the Prime Minister.

2.13. Within this framework, the integrity of statistics depends critically upon the professionalism of the staff engaged on statistical work. Professional standards, encapsulated in the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*, are maintained through statistical training for staff, active involvement with the wider statistical community, providing methodological support for staff, high and common standards for recruitment and promotion, and the mechanisms allowing staff to move widely throughout their careers.

2.14. There is no general Statistics Law in the United Kingdom defining the roles and responsibilities of the official statistical service. However, many Acts of Parliament contain provisions for the collection of information, of which a small number are almost wholly statistical, such as the Census Acts, the Agricultural Statistics Act and the Statistics of Trade Act. In addition, participants in the European Community Statistical Programme, which encompasses all statistics required for the development and monitoring of Community policies, are now legally bound to ensure

that their output is produced in accordance with principles enshrined in the Regulation on Community Statistics². There is significant common ground between the current Programme and the output of UK official statistics.

The International Context

2.15. In recognition of the universal importance of reliable official statistics to good public management and to the democratic process, the United Nations Statistical Commission unanimously adopted in 1994 a statement of *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* (annex C). It was designed to guide governments and statisticians in establishing and maintaining credible national statistical systems, free from improper political influence, and it formed part of the underpinning for the Regulation on Community Statistics referred to above.

2.16. Against that background, examples of operational frameworks in European Union and other major countries are summarised in annex D. Most operate with a central statistical agency with responsibilities for coordination of government statistical work generally: the extent to which statistical work is the responsibility of departments outside the central agency varies, but in particular policy-related work for Ministers is frequently handled in that way. Independent statistical commissions, determining or advising on statistical programmes, are a common feature. Most of these countries have enshrined their operational frameworks in statistics laws as a means of safeguarding integrity. Arrangements in these other countries provide a useful backdrop against which to consider options for the United Kingdom.

² Council Regulation (EC) No 322/97. *Official Journal of the European Communities* No L 52, 22/2/97, pp1-7.



Chapter 3: The Need for Change

3.1. There are long-standing concerns about the integrity of official statistics which have been highlighted by a number of bodies and organisations. The 1990 Royal Statistical Society report, *Counting with Confidence*, referred to earlier, concluded that “the organisational and operational framework of the Government Statistical Service is regarded as inadequate” and recommended greater centralisation of the Government Statistical Service, the establishment of a National Statistical Commission, and legislation in the form of a UK Statistical Act.

3.2. Others have also expressed concern. In 1991 and again in 1993, *The Economist* compiled league tables, based on the views of a panel of international statisticians, of which countries have the most trustworthy statistics³. In the 1991 survey, Britain was ranked ninth out of ten. A key comment was that “because Britain’s Government Statistical Service is one of the least independent the figures often taste of fudge”. In 1993, Britain was ranked sixth out of thirteen, a testimony to significant improvements in quality. Indeed, Britain was cited as one of two countries to offer “the best combinations of accuracy and timeliness”. But what brought down Britain’s overall standing was “the lingering suspicion that statistics...in Britain are subject to political meddling”. The statistical validity of *The Economist’s* exercise might be open to question, but the conclusions chime well with popular perception.

3.3. In 1995, the Royal Statistical Society carried out a study on the measurement of unemployment⁴. It concluded that “it is clear to us that the general public, many politicians, the media and various pressure groups do not trust the unemployment figures or find them convincing”. The report made a number of recommendations specific to unemployment statistics and a more general one: “We are again of the view that the major conclusions of the Royal Statistical Society report of 1990 still hold...”

3.4. Despite important changes made during the mid-1990s, as set out in the previous chapter, there are continuing public concerns. In 1996, ONS began research amongst members of the public about their perception of official statistics. In a survey in March 1997, only one in four respondents who had heard of the Retail Prices Index thought that it was generally correct. Emerging findings from the programme as a whole indicate that people’s views about official statistics are more negative than is desirable, and that there is significant concern about quality and political interference.

³ *The Economist*: 7 September 1991 and 11 September 1993.

⁴ *Report of the Working party on the Measurement of Unemployment in the UK*. Royal Statistical Society, 1995.

3.5. It is seldom suggested that Ministers actively change the numbers, rather that there remains scope for statistics to be subjected to political influence in more subtle ways: a range of sources indicate particular public concerns over unemployment statistics, crime statistics, statistics on National Health Service waiting lists, and measures of inflation. The ways in which political considerations can impinge on statistics include⁵:


- *Statistical outputs*: Where there is a perception that the choice of statistics to be collected, and the definitions and methods used, is politically influenced, public confidence in integrity is undermined. Such concerns have afflicted the unemployment statistics, in particular. Appropriate mechanisms need to be in place which define the statistical outputs to be produced, in the light of users' requirements. Decisions on these matters must be transparent and based on clear principles to guide the body of statistics published;
- *Release practices*: Public confidence is affected when there is any perception that the form and timing of publication of statistics may be politically influenced. Good practices to counter this, set out in the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*, include the advance publication of release dates for key statistics, and the separation of statistical releases and commentary from any political comment;
- *Openness*: To safeguard the credibility of official statistics, statisticians must be free to air their professional concerns within government and to respond, in their professional capacity, to public debate and concerns about statistics;
- *Resources*: Like all activities, official statistics must be produced within what is affordable - both in terms of direct costs and in terms of minimising the burden on data suppliers. But the financing arrangements must be open and their effects on statistical activity transparent.

3.6. The root of most concerns is that the current system is regarded as lacking appropriate safeguards against political interference and as being insufficiently open, which serves to breed distrust of the figures. Quality needs to be assured, and the production and presentation of statistics needs to be free from political interference, and to be seen as such. Priorities must be driven by the requirements of all users - Parliament, government and the wider community.

3.7. The Government accordingly wishes to ensure a sound accountability and governance framework for official statistics, as a fundamental step to addressing these concerns.

3.8. Options for the accountability and governance of official statistics are considered in chapter 5. However, an important preliminary step is to clarify what is meant by "official statistics". This is the subject of the next chapter.

⁵ A full analysis of areas of political threat is contained in *Politics and Statistics: Independence, Dependence or Interaction?* William Seltzer. DESIPA Working Paper No.6. United Nations. New York. 1994.



Chapter 4: The Scope of Official Statistics: Towards “National Statistics”

4.1. “Official statistics” can mean different things to different people. There are three broad ways of defining it. First, it may be defined in terms of *people* providing the service (eg. the Government Statistical Service). Second, it may be defined in terms of *activities* (eg. collecting data, publishing statistics, providing statistical advice to support policy work). Third, it may be defined in terms of *outputs*, or products of statistical work (eg. the published statistics on the labour market, on crime, on health etc). Whichever approach is taken, there are additional questions about the scope of each definition - what people, services or outputs should be included?

4.2. The Government believes that trust in the outputs - the statistics themselves - must be the real goal (chapter 1). People and activities are the essential contributors to this. Chapter 2 has already set out the complex web of people involved in official statistical work and explained that this work covers a wide range of activities, from data specification, collection, processing and release, to the provision of statistical advice to Ministers to aid policy development and evaluation. All of this work needs to be carried out to professional standards and with integrity. It will also have to take account of the Freedom of Information Act which the Government is committed to securing during this Parliament.

4.3. These requirements for integrity are demanding but no different from those required from the work of the civil/public service generally. The area of statistical work that stands out for special consideration, because of its particular nature and crucial importance, is that relating to the production and release of statistics that Parliament (and, in future, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly) and the wider community rely on to assess the state of society and the performance of government. This might be described as “National Statistics”, that is the work supporting the production of statistics intended for public use.

4.4. On this basis, the scope of National Statistics would include activities such as data specification, collection, processing, analysis and release related to statistics of public interest. It would exclude some statistical work currently carried out in government such as policy advice and work concerned with departmental management. However, National Statistics might be derived from administrative and research sources in government, and the statisticians would require access to these sources for statistical purposes. Similarly, National Statistics activity would need to include participation in the development of relevant administrative systems and research programmes.

4.5. Any listing of statistics of public interest will change over time. But the concept of National Statistics is clear. The Government believes this definition is likely to prove the most durable and useful for achieving the aim of having publicly available official statistics which are coherent, dependable and accessible, transparently free from political interference, describing the state of the nation and measuring the performance of government. On this basis, the expectation is that all current GSS publications and public access databases of public interest would be within the scope of National Statistics. Key statistical outputs from other public bodies such as the Bank of England could also be within scope. There would be additions and withdrawals of individual outputs as circumstances change. A Statistical Commission or Parliamentary committee (as described in the next chapter), if either were established, would have their own views on the scope of National Statistics.

4.6. It would be natural for all outputs designated as part of National Statistics to be clearly marked as such. That would convey that these outputs had been produced under governance and accountability arrangements designed to guarantee their integrity.

4.7. The next chapter addresses the governance and accountability necessary to secure the integrity of National Statistics, including ensuring its scope is kept properly under review. Chapter 6 considers where responsibilities should be located. Chapter 7 addresses the arrangements necessary for ensuring all statistical work, including that outside the scope of National Statistics, is carried out to high professional standards.

Questions for Consultation

Is the concept of National Statistics the right one to define the coverage that we are looking for? Are there activities or outputs which should be specifically included or excluded from the definition of National Statistics?

Chapter 5: Accountability and Governance

5.1. This chapter discusses arrangements to secure the integrity of National Statistics. It considers ways of establishing a framework which:

- strengthens statistical priority-setting and responsiveness to all users;
- ensures professional freedom in the operational production of statistical outputs;
- ensures statistics are produced to high professional standards, and;
- provides greater transparency and accountability.

Throughout, the professional statistician overseeing National Statistics is referred to as the “Head (of National Statistics)”.

Options for Accountability and Governance

5.2. This Green Paper considers the following models:

- A) Strengthening existing arrangements
- B) Establishment of a governing board, with a non-executive chair
- C) Establishment of an independent Statistical Commission
- D) Direct accountability to Parliament.

5.3. The models outlined below should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, and it would be possible to combine elements of each. Similarly it is worth noting that under any model, steps could be taken to strengthen the dialogue with Parliament.

Model A: Strengthening Existing Arrangements

5.4. This model might be regarded as the minimum change option. It would involve some strengthening of arrangements within the current framework by delegating more responsibility to the Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession for statistics in other bodies involved in National Statistics work.

5.5. The Head of National Statistics, working with Heads of Profession, would be responsible for maintaining the quality of National Statistics, and would be required to have adequate procedures in place to guarantee the integrity of work being carried out under the National Statistics designation. It would be important to guarantee that the production and presentation of National Statistics was in line with professional and international best practice as set out in a published code of practice. The current *Official Statistics Code of Practice* could be enhanced for this purpose. It could also set out a clearer delegation of responsibilities for operational matters from

Ministers to Heads of Profession, in a similar way to that set out in the *ONS Framework Document*. Building on the current arrangement whereby the Head of the GSS reports annually to the Prime Minister, each year the Head of National Statistics would publish a report on the development of National Statistics, including details of the quality assurance programme undertaken.

Comment

5.6. The main advantage of such an approach would be a clearer demonstration that statistical operations were free from political interference. The changes could also be accomplished relatively easily.


5.7. However, the question arises whether these enhanced arrangements would, on their own, be sufficient to strengthen public confidence in the freedom of statistical operations from political interference, given that government statisticians would still be directly responsible to Ministers. Legislation to underpin the delegation of operational responsibilities from Ministers to the Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession might help in this respect. The drafting of any legislation would need careful thought.

5.8. Moreover, this model would not deal with the issue of determining priorities within National Statistics overall, in the light of users' needs. Without further change, it would still be for individual Ministers to determine the statistical priorities and budgets within their departments. Alternatively, if the Head of National Statistics and/or the Heads of Profession collectively were given power of direction, there would be complicated budgeting issues to be solved. Accountability would also not be straightforward. Who, for example, would be responsible to Parliament for the expenditure involved with these statistics?

5.9. The Head of National Statistics and/or Heads of Profession would be responsible for assuring quality and freedom from political interference. They would also need to ensure that statistics were produced in a way which minimised burdens on data suppliers. Would this give sufficient checks and balances, or would there be a need for a check that these obligations had been carried out successfully?

Model B: Establishment of a governing board, with a non-executive chair

5.10. An option for building on the previous model would be to establish a governing board responsible for National Statistics strategy and for assurance of the integrity of National Statistics activities and outputs. It would comprise both executive members (for example, the Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession) and non-executive members, with a non-executive chair. Ministerial appointments to the Board would be made following a transparent appointments process based on merit in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments' Code of Practice. The Board would produce an annual report, setting out the development of National Statistics. The Head of National Statistics, with



Heads of Profession, would be responsible for all operational matters. But the Board would be responsible for certifying that it had maintained both aspects of statistical integrity: assured quality and freedom from political interference.

5.11. The Board could play a key role in the statistical priority-setting process. Within a budget set by Ministers, the Head of National Statistics and professional colleagues would prepare a draft high-level strategic National Statistics programme. The Board would consider this and work towards a final programme which it would recommend to Ministers. In arriving at the final programme, the Board would draw on the views of others. Taking account of the Board's recommendations, it would then be for Ministers to agree the relevant aspects of the programme both within and between their departments.

5.12. The Board would be responsible for quality assurance. In practice, it could rely largely on its executive membership to carry out the statistical auditing function, but it could also arrange for external audit, if it felt that to be appropriate.

5.13. Within such arrangements, the Board would need to ensure that effective consultation mechanisms were in place to inform the process. The Statistics Advisory Committee would remain an important and authoritative source of advice, representing all stakeholders, and ensuring that burdens on data suppliers were minimised. The Board would receive and provide advice on the planned work programme, on quality and integrity issues, and on public confidence generally.

Comment

5.14. A potential advantage of this model over model A would be that responsibility for quality assurance would no longer rest solely with those who were directly responsible for producing the statistics. However, in practice the Board might still be regarded as insufficiently independent of those with operational responsibility. On this basis, would this model be perceived as offering sufficient improvement in quality assurance arrangements over model A?

5.15. Another potential advantage would be that the model would go some way to increasing the transparency of statistical priority-setting if the statistical work programme recommended to Ministers was published. Such arrangements would involve the Board coming to a collective view over priorities. The question is whether the public would perceive the Board to be objective enough to take sufficient account of the views of the wider community. Given that the Board would contain a significant proportion of civil servants, issues under model A of their relationship with Ministers would still apply. As with model A, would legislation be needed to give this model sufficient strength?

5.16. Two further models are considered. In the first, accountability is addressed by leaving the Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession accountable to Ministers, but introducing an outside body to assure integrity. In the second, the Head of National Statistics is made directly accountable to a Committee of the House of Commons.

Model C: An independent Statistical Commission


5.17. The key features of this model are that an independent Statistical Commission would help to separate Ministers from statistical operations and would act as a check on the powers and performance of the Head of National Statistics.

5.18. The Commission could have one or both of two key roles. Under the first role, the Statistical Commission would be responsible for checking the quality of National Statistics. One possibility would be to give full responsibility for the statistical audit process to the Commission, which would be able to call on external resources to carry this out. An alternative option would be for the Commission to steer and publicly comment on the Head's own statistical audit processes and for the Commission to hold the Head professionally accountable. Statistical audit exercises could be carried out locally by the Head of National Statistics, with spot checks on particular audits and areas of concern being carried out by Commission staff or by independent auditors appointed by the Commission.

5.19. The Statistical Commission could also play a second key role in representing, in the priority-setting process, the views of users and those who supply the basic data. The Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession would be required to prepare each year a draft high-level strategic programme within a budget set by Ministers, taking advice from a wide range of users and others. Government is clearly a major user of statistics and its views would need to be taken into account. The Statistical Commission would then consider that programme, taking account of the views of users and data suppliers and the resources available, and would comment to Ministers, but in public, either recommending acceptance of the draft programme or noting the Commission's reservations, as appropriate. It might wish on occasion to carry out in depth study of particular topics.

5.20. Taking account of the Head's strategic programme and the Statistical Commission's comments on it, it would then be for Ministers to agree the relevant aspects of the programme both within and between their departments. The finalised programme would be published, together with reasons for any deviations from the Commission's recommendations.

5.21. The Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession would be responsible for preparing their own work plans to implement this programme in accordance with published standards, having regard to minimising burdens on data suppliers. The enhanced Code of Practice



envisaged under model A might be the appropriate basis for these standards but, to be effective and command public confidence, would need to be strongly enshrined. Such a Code would give clear responsibility to the Head of National Statistics, working with departmental Heads of Profession, for methodological, presentational and other operational matters. At the end of each year, the Statistical Commission would review performance against the programme, drawing in views from users, and would report publicly.

5.22. To perform either role effectively, it would be important for the Commission to be regarded as an authoritative body with a powerful voice, entirely independent both of Ministers and of the Head. To be effective, the Commission could not be so large as to be representative of all users, and it would therefore need to demonstrate that it took account of a wide range of issues and views in forming its opinions. As well as people of wide experience and expertise in the provision and use of statistics, the Commission would include lay representatives. Ministerial appointments to the Commission would be made following a transparent appointments process based on merit, in accordance with the Code of Practice published by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Although the Commission would be able to buy in expertise and advice, it would probably also require a small permanent staff to support its work.

Comment

5.23. The key advantage of this model would be the independent, non-political check which the Statistical Commission would provide on the quality assurance mechanisms in place for National Statistics. This might be expected to result in a greater degree of public confidence in their quality than would reliance on arrangements lacking this feature.

5.24. Priority-setting arrangements might also be perceived to be strengthened through the much greater degree of transparency involved. Because the Commission's comments on the proposed statistical work programme and Ministers' decisions on it would be published, the degree of any political involvement in the process would become much clearer. Moreover, it may be seen as advantageous that final advice to Ministers on priorities - tendered in public - would be from a Commission, independent of either Ministers or those producing statistics, specifically taking account of a wide range of users' views.

5.25. A possible disadvantage is that because decisions on departmental funds and programmes would remain with Ministers, the perception could be that Ministers were in a position to influence unduly the statistical work programme. However, the arrangements would require that Ministerial decisions were made transparently and in public, so that they would need to defend their actions. At the same time, if the Commission had concerns about Ministerial decisions, it would also be able to draw attention to them publicly. Should these safeguards not be regarded as adequate, comments on possible additional safeguards would be welcomed.

5.26. In addition to Ministers being publicly accountable for their decisions, accountability to Parliament would provide a further bulwark. It

would be open to Parliament to enhance their scrutiny of the statistical programme. Departmental Committees, for example, could scrutinise and hold Ministers accountable for individual departmental programmes. Moreover, if it wished, Parliament could put in hand arrangements to scrutinise the overall statistical programme.

5.27. Overall, this model would provide the Head of National Statistics and Heads of Profession with clear responsibility for delivering a publicly agreed programme in accordance with published standards. They would have operational freedom within the programme. The Statistical Commission would provide an independent and public check on quality assurance.

5.28. A number of countries operate under arrangements which include a Statistical Commission. In the Netherlands, for example, the Director General of the Central Bureau of Statistics prepares a work programme for approval by the Central Commission for Statistics. However, in some countries the role of the Statistical Commission is different. In Canada, for example, the Statistical Commission advises the Director of Statistics Canada on priorities but the work programme is, by convention, determined by the Director. Further information on the variants found in other countries is at annex D.


Model D: Direct accountability to Parliament

5.29. A further possible model would be for a Committee of the House of Commons to assume direct responsibility for the National Statistics programme. The Head of National Statistics would have executive responsibility for operations, and would report directly to the Committee. This option would resemble the National Audit Office (NAO), which is funded by, and directly accountable to, Parliament.

5.30. Unlike in the other models outlined in this chapter, responsibility for National Statistics work would need to be brought together in a centralised body, independent of government - a National Statistics Office. This would require legislation. The centralisation would need to be addressed in organisational and resource terms, but not necessarily in physical terms: the Office could commission work to National Statistics standards from others, or could second its staff. At the same time, it would be essential to ensure that the statisticians working for the National Statistics Office were given the right of access to administrative data sources in government departments for statistical purposes.

5.31. It would be the responsibility of the Committee to ensure that arrangements were in place for quality assurance of sufficient rigour to guarantee public confidence in the statistics.

5.32. Parliament would provide direct funding for National Statistics work, similar to the current arrangements for the NAO. With responsibility



for the level and allocation of funding across work areas, the Committee would be in a position to address what it regarded as the priorities for the National Statistics programme. It would need to establish consultative and advisory mechanisms to ensure that the needs of all users were taken into account in a transparent process for determining priorities. It would also need to consider setting up mechanisms which would ensure that burdens on data suppliers were minimised.

Comment

5.33. While direct reporting to Parliament has proved effective in the case of the NAO, it is much less clear that it would be an effective arrangement for National Statistics work. The NAO has a largely “watchdog” role, with much of its work involving reporting on the efficiency and effectiveness with which public money is spent. Accordingly, much of the work considered by the Public Accounts Committee is of a non-party political nature. By contrast, a key feature of statistical work is the provision of data allowing the impact of government policies and actions to be assessed, and one of the main aims of change is to ensure a framework that will guarantee that statistics are produced in a way which is free from political interference. A Parliamentary Committee would need to be perceived as removed from the political process to provide credibly such a guarantee. This would be a key requirement.

5.34. The other yardstick for assessing this model is in respect of setting priorities in the light of users’ needs. Although the existence of a single budget for National Statistics and a single body responsible for determining priorities would present scope for simplification as compared to existing arrangements, there are questions as to whether a Parliamentary Committee would be more effective at setting priorities and allocating funds for National Statistics than Ministers. As noted above, it would need to maintain consultative and advisory machinery to determine users’ views as to priorities, across the whole range of statistics, and to take due regard of them. This is a far from insignificant task. Indeed, overall, this model would imply a substantial administrative workload for a Parliamentary Committee, well in excess of that placed on most such committees. In other areas of national activity where priorities have to be set, Parliament has preferred to delegate such decisions to Ministers, who remain accountable to Parliament for these decisions.

5.35. No other major national statistical offices have been established on this model. The common view in the international statistical community is that working within the government framework benefits statistical integrity, by promoting improved relevance and responsiveness of statistical work to public policy issues. This can lead in turn to both a better service to all users and to better decision-making by government. Taking statistical work out of government runs the risk of reducing statistics’ relevance and their invaluable contribution to good government.

5.36. Indeed it is likely that at least some departments would need to set up their own statistical units, independent of the National Statistics Office, for example to carry out policy-related work and work associated with

departmental management. This would be a wasteful use of resources. It would also mean that any current benefits, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness within departments, associated with synergies between statistical work on the management of policy and service delivery and work on the collection and compilation of official statistics, would be lost. A further source of duplication might arise in the case of international representation. It would be difficult for National Statistics Office staff, being independent of Government, to represent UK Government interest in international discussions of policy-related statistical issues. The Government might need to continue to have civil servants with expertise in such areas. All these considerations might mean that this model would be relatively expensive to implement.

5.37. Overall, there appear to be some significant practical difficulties with this model. If it was to be preferred over other models, ways would need to be found of overcoming these difficulties. It would also need to be clear that any advantages it enjoyed over other models outweighed its greater likely cost.

Cost Implications

5.38. None of the four base models presented in this chapter, or combinations of them, could be introduced without some financial implications. Costs would primarily arise in strengthening the mechanisms for priority-setting and quality assurance. Specific costs would depend on the exact nature of the final model adopted, including whether it was accompanied by any changes in departmental responsibilities for statistics (chapter 6). However, some general themes on costs are apparent. It is clear that the priority-setting mechanisms for models C and D, involving a Statistical Commission and a new Parliamentary body respectively, would incur significantly more costs than either model A or B. The Parliamentary model D would have the highest costs, both in setting it up and on an ongoing basis. Overall, the costs of each model broadly rise from model A through to model D. Offsetting these costs in each of the models would be efficiency gains and other benefits resulting from the improved coherence and quality of the overall statistical programme. In determining the appropriate accountability and governance arrangements in the light of this consultation exercise, the Government will, of course, need to take account of likely costs and benefits.

Questions for Consultation

Which arrangements for accountability and governance would contribute best to meeting the goals for guaranteed integrity and greater public confidence in government statistics? Which of the four models, discussed above, or a combination of any of their elements, offers the best chance of success? What steps should be taken to secure the preferred arrangements?



Chapter 6: Location of Responsibilities

6.1. The essence of National Statistics would be that it represented the production and publication of a statistical picture of the state of the nation, underpinned by accountability and governance arrangements guaranteeing assured quality and freedom from political interference. The work that would be needed to produce this picture is currently the responsibility of a large number of government departments and beyond, as described in chapter 2.

6.2. For the future, one organisational model would be to organise relevant activities within a single department to which the governance and accountability arrangements would apply. This would be an inevitable consequence of the “Direct Accountability to Parliament” model considered in the previous chapter. But, for other models, the question of where responsibilities should be located would remain open.

6.3. In general terms, centralising all responsibilities for National Statistics would have the advantages of simplicity and apparent tidiness. But an excessively centralised system could lead to reduced contact between those working on National Statistics, their customers either in or outside government, and those carrying out other statistical work in government. This in turn could lead to duplication of services and to inefficiencies. Centralisation could also reduce the contact of producers with key providers in government, for example those responsible for administrative systems from which so much information is derived for statistical purposes. A less centralised organisation may provide a more effective statistical service so long as assurances of integrity can be provided through appropriate governance arrangements.

6.4. An alternative approach might therefore be to decide the location of responsibility for particular blocks of statistical work on a case-by-case basis, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of their being centralised or left in other government departments or other public bodies. Such an assessment might take into account the following considerations:

- (i) *The Customer Base:* Where the customers for a particular block of work are generally narrowly based - for example they are predominantly either in one particular government department or are in an area for which one department is primarily responsible - responsiveness to customers' needs might argue for responsibility for the work to be decentralised. Where the customers are more widely spread, the case for centralised responsibility would be the greater.

(ii) *The Supplier Base:* Where two or more areas of work share a supplier base, there may be advantages both in terms of minimising burdens on suppliers and in terms of reliability of data for the work to be centralised. In recent years, for example, ONS has taken on an increasing proportion of official business surveys. By contrast, where the suppliers of material underpinning statistics are narrowly focused - for example they fall predominantly within one particular government department or are non-government bodies involved in an area for which one department is primarily responsible - there would be a stronger case for locating responsibility within that department.


(iii) *The Knowledge Base:* There are advantages in statistical staff working closely with experts in the relevant subject area. Tapping into the knowledge of subject area specialists can improve quality at all stages of the statistical process, from data specification through to dissemination. In some areas the knowledge base overlaps strongly with the customer base.

(iv) *Synergy with Other Activities:* Where a statistical work area in a government department or other public body has synergy with another work area (either statistical or non-statistical), there may be benefits in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, including quality, for related work areas to be managed in that department. However, where there is synergy between statistical work areas in two or more bodies there may be similar benefits in managing them within a single body. Synergy arguments may be related to arguments based on the customer and supplier bases.

6.5. The Government will consider the need for changes to the location of responsibilities in the light of the decisions on accountability and governance.

Questions for Consultation

Are the criteria for determining location appropriate? Are there specific statistical activities or outputs that you would identify as meriting organisational change?



Chapter 7: The Maintenance of Professional Standards across all Statistical Work in Government

7.1. Statistical work throughout government must match up to the same high professional standards as that required for National Statistics. Accordingly, arrangements would be needed to ensure the promotion of professional standards across all official statistical work, regardless of the location of the work or the professional designation of the person carrying out the work (eg. statistician, economist, scientist, social researcher).

7.2. Such arrangements would depend on the framework for accountability and governance adopted. If National Statistics continued to be the responsibility of government rather than Parliament, then arrangements could build on the existing arrangements for the GSS and the role of the Head of the GSS. These might include mechanisms to share best practice, including maintaining a code of practice; arrangements to quality-assure work; arrangements for the recruitment of professionally qualified staff; and training and development for all people carrying out statistical work in government. Many professional statisticians in government would work both on National Statistics activities and on other statistical activities. The designation of some work as related to National Statistics need not inhibit movement between statistical posts. This would both help maintain common professional standards and ensure that statisticians gain a close understanding of the needs of different users.

7.3. If Parliament were responsible for National Statistics, through a centralised National Statistics Office as described in the previous chapter, arrangements for promoting professional standards across official statistical work would need to build primarily on adopting common codes of practice and cooperation on quality assurance, including training. Because staff of the National Statistics Office would not be civil servants, it would be more difficult for staff to move between the National Statistics Office and statistical posts in government departments.

Question for Consultation

Are arrangements for maintaining professional statistical standards across all government statistical work of the kind discussed above the right ones?

Chapter 8: Statistics and Devolution

8.1. Government departments, international bodies and the wider community require a wide range of statistics for policy and other purposes at UK, constituent country and regional levels. Much of the activity associated with meeting these needs would fall within the scope of National Statistics, as considered in chapter 4.

8.2. Responsibility for producing UK, country and regional statistics is currently shared between ONS, Whitehall departments, the Scottish and Northern Ireland departments, and the Welsh Office. All work closely together to meet statistical needs, through a wide range of administrative mechanisms coordinated through the GSS. The mechanisms have two main themes: interdepartmental consultation and, subject to safeguarding confidentiality, the sharing of data for statistical purposes.

8.3. Under the Government's proposals for devolution, a number of policy areas would be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Responsibility for statistics for these policy areas would also be devolved. Responsibility for producing UK, country and regional statistics would therefore remain shared, although the balance between the relevant bodies would be shifted to some extent. All parties would continue to have an interest in compiling and promoting comparable statistics, and they would therefore need, and wish, to continue to work closely together as now. It will be important, however, to ensure that statistics can be produced efficiently on a UK and sub-UK basis to meet national interests and international obligations.

8.4. Concern for the integrity of statistics applies as much to statistics relating to policy areas to be devolved as it does to statistics relating to policy areas such as macroeconomic policy which will not be devolved.

8.5. The question arises therefore, whether arrangements introduced to enhance the integrity of statistics should also apply, or be replicated, in areas where responsibility for statistics has been devolved. Appropriate arrangements would need to be agreed by the relevant authorities once the outcome of devolution became clear. Appropriate arrangements would also be required for Northern Ireland.

Questions for Consultation

Are existing arrangements adequate to secure UK statistics and coordination? Should the principles which guide the enhancement of integrity of statistics generally guide also the arrangements for devolved responsibilities?



Annexes



ANNEX A: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Early Days

The collection of statistics goes back many years: records relating to imports and exports go back to the seventeenth century; the first population census was in 1801; the collection of statistics of births and deaths in England and Wales began in 1837. Traditionally, collection has been decentralised: until the Second World War, the structure was essentially one of separate statistical units attached to each government department.

Creation of a Central Statistical Office

In 1941, Sir Winston Churchill announced the establishment of the Central Statistical Office (CSO), with the aim of ensuring coherence of statistical information:

“to consolidate and make sure that agreed figures only are used. The utmost confusion is caused when people argue on different statistical data.... The various Departmental statistical branches will, of course, continue as at present, but agreement must be reached between them and the Central Statistical Office.”⁶

The 1960s

It was not until the late 1960s that the performance of the statistical system again came under scrutiny. Following a report of the Estimates Committee of the House of Commons⁷, a reorganisation was effected by Sir Claus Moser, then Head of the CSO. The reorganisation had three central elements. First, it created two new offices to collect, on behalf of all departments, statistics from businesses (the Business Statistics Office) and information from individuals and households through censuses, surveys and registers (the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS)). Second, it gave an enhanced role to the CSO in managing government statistics. Third, it established a Government Statistical Service (GSS) to improve coordination in the management of government statistics and to develop a cadre of professional statisticians across government.

The 1970s

The GSS expanded rapidly during the 1970s reflecting the higher profile of statistical information in government policy making. The period was marked by increasing relevance and coherence of official statistics. There was progress on both economic statistics and social statistics, epitomised by the launch of the *Social Trends* publication which brought together statistics from a wide range of sources to paint a statistical picture of the state of the nation.

The 1980s

In 1980 the Government decided to take stock. Following a review conducted by Sir Derek Rayner, the mission of the statistical service was sharply focused:

⁶ Minute from Winston Churchill to Sir Edward Bridges. In *Keeping Score: the First Fifty Years of the Central Statistical Office*, Ward and Doggett (1991). London: Central Statistical Office.

⁷ *Fourth Report from the Estimates Committee, Session 1966-67: Government Statistical Services*. London: HMSO.

“Information should not be collected primarily for publication. It should be collected primarily because the Government needs it for its own business.”⁸

This became known as the “Rayner doctrine”.

The result was a policy to reduce by about a quarter the staff and administrative costs of official statistics. Accordingly, the number of staff employed in the GSS fell sharply between 1981 and 1989.

As the 1980s progressed, concerns about the quality of statistics grew. As the Royal Statistical Society recorded, these concerns amounted to a serious erosion of public confidence in UK statistics⁹. Parliament too expressed concerns. A report by the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee noted¹⁰:

“We regard the problems of official statistics as sufficiently serious to warrant a thorough review. Accordingly we recommend the Government undertakes an investigation into the operation of the various departments involved in the collection of national accounts statistics with a view to improving their reliability.”

Into the 1990s

Following a subsequent investigation by the Government (the “Pickford Review”), a new expanded CSO was established in July 1989 integrating additional responsibilities from other departments. These included business statistics from the Business Statistics Office and the Retail Prices Index from the Employment Department.

In the early part of 1990, additional action was taken. The Chancellor of the Exchequer indicated to Parliament his continuing concern about the statistical base.¹¹ This was quickly followed by an announcement in May 1990 of a package of measures (the “Chancellor’s Initiative”), backed up by substantial new resources, to improve quality.

The announcement of a second package of measures in November 1991 accompanied the launch of the CSO as an “executive agency”. Executive agency status was an important development in itself in two respects. First, it put the focus on the quality of service provided to customers, both inside and outside government, and hence confirmed a change from the “Rayner doctrine”. Second, it gave an opportunity to confirm the arrangements to ensure the integrity and validity of UK official statistics.¹²

A more general political focus on the citizen provided an opportunity to extend this message. The 1993 White Paper on Open Government¹³ noted that:

“Official statistics...are collected by government to inform debate, decision-making and research both within government and by the wider community. They provide an objective perspective of the changes taking place in national life and allow comparisons between periods of time and geographical areas.

Vital as this is, open access to official statistics provides the citizen with more than a picture of society. It offers a window on the work and performance of government itself, showing the scale of government activity in every area of public policy and allowing the impact of government policies and actions to be assessed.

It is the responsibility of government to provide [reliable social and economic statistics] and to maintain public confidence in them.”

⁸ *Government Statistical Services*, Cmnd 8236. Her Majesty’s Government (1981). HMSO.


⁹ *Official Statistics: Counting with Confidence*, Royal Statistical Society (1990).

¹⁰ *Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee Report on the 1988 Budget*. (1988). HMSO.

¹¹ *Minutes of Evidence to Treasury and Civil Service Committee*, p31. (1990). HMSO.

¹² *CSO Agency Framework Document*. (1991). CSO.

¹³ *Open Government*. Cmnd 2290. (1993). HMSO.



Against this background, a number of initiatives were set in train to improve the quality of service to all users¹⁴. One was the adoption in 1995 of the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*,¹⁵ which sets out the principles and practices underpinning official statistical work: for example, the need for impartiality, consultation and openness. A second was the creation in 1996 of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), from a merger of the CSO and the OPCS. The case for the merger was based on three anticipated benefits:

- (i) the main collection and primary analysis processes would be centralised in the new Office, while the advice and assistance to policy makers and Ministers would remain decentralised in departments. The aim would be to combine the advantages of centralised and decentralised arrangements. As a by-product, it would also make it easier for the Head of the GSS to influence standards, classifications and practices across the GSS.
- (ii) an office encompassing a much wider range of statistical activities would have a more influential role in establishing statistical priorities. As a result, management and co-ordination of the GSS would be easier. Also, there would be a firmer basis for identifying gaps in national statistics and realising opportunities to fill them.
- (iii) the size and range of skills in such an office would make it feasible and easier to bring together the massive amount of data that exists in government, to relate them in a meaningful way, and to make them available across government and to the community in general.

¹⁴ A summary is contained in "You can Count on us with Confidence", styled as a response to the 1990 RSS report "Counting with Confidence". *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, series A*, 158, Part 3, pp467 - 489.

¹⁵ *Official Statistics Code of Practice*. (1995). CSO.

ANNEX B: CURRENT FRAMEWORK FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS¹⁶

I. The Government Statistical Service

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) is the major provider of official statistics in the United Kingdom. Its role is:

“to provide Parliament, government and the wider community with the statistical information, analysis and advice needed to improve decision-making, stimulate research and inform debate.”

and it aims:

- to provide government at all levels with a statistical service to support the formulation and monitoring of social and economic policies;
- to inform Parliament and the citizen about the state of the nation and provide a window on the work and performance of government, allowing the impact of government policies and actions to be assessed;
- to provide business with a statistical service which promotes the efficient functioning of industry and commerce;
- to provide researchers, analysts and other customers with a statistical service which assists their work and studies;
- to promote these aims within the UK, the European Union (EU) and internationally and to provide a statistical service to meet EU and international requirements.

Approximately half of the 4,700 GSS staff work in the Office for National Statistics (ONS): the remainder work in other government departments and agencies. About 600 are professional statisticians, known collectively as the Statistician Group.

¹⁶ A fuller picture is contained within the *GSS Annual Report* and the *ONS Framework Document*, available free from the National Statistics Information and Library Service, tel: 01633 812973.

Departments and Other Bodies Employing GSS Members

Full-time equivalents at 1 April 1997

	All GSS Staff	of whom: Statistician Group
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Ministry of	158	22
HM Customs and Excise	509	5
Defence, Ministry of	116	19
Education and Employment, Department for	176	40
Environment, Department of the ^(a)	150	38
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	3	1
Forestry Commission	3	2
General Register Office for Scotland	67	5
Health and Safety Executive	28	11
Health, Department of	196	48
Home Office	142	26
Inland Revenue	46	22
Lord Chancellor's Department	13	5
National Heritage, Department of ^(a)	4	2
National Savings, Department of	7	1
Office of Manpower Economics	7	7
Office for National Statistics	2,551	172
Office of Public Service	13	2
Office for Standards in Education	15	4
Office of Water Services	2	2
Overseas Development Administration ^(a)	26	9
Scottish Office	103	34
Social Security, Department of	138	40
Trade and Industry, Department of	88	35
Transport, Department of ^(a)	92	17
HM Treasury	34	10
Welsh Office	57	22
Total	4,743	595

(a): Since 1 April 1997, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Transport have been combined in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Overseas Development Administration has become the Department for International Development, and the Department of National Heritage has become the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Some statistical work is also carried out by government researchers and scientists, rather than government statisticians. The GSS works closely on statistical matters with those groups and also with other organisations, such as the Bank of England and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

2. Statistical Work Carried Out in Government

Statistical work covers a wide range of tasks. Some of the main ones are:


- (i) *Policy Work*: Ministers and officials require statistical inputs and advice when considering the effectiveness of existing policies or in appraising the impact of new

policies. This work entails using relevant information to illuminate the proposed policy and can involve forecasting, preparing or supporting Parliamentary Bills, and advising Ministers for Parliamentary debates;

- (ii) *Departmental Management:* Some statistical work is intimately tied up with the management of a department, for example, statistical work within the finance and personnel functions;
- (iii) *Monitoring and Evaluation of Service Provision:* Departments' responsibilities may involve the delivery of services. In such cases it is departments' responsibility to hold service providers (eg. the police, the prisons, the National Health Service) to account, and therefore to carry out statistical monitoring of service delivery;
- (iv) *Research:* Departments carry out research to understand and address the issues for which they have responsibility (eg. why is the crime rate changing?; what is the epidemiology of BSE?). Such research may involve statistical activity;
- (v) *Data Specification:* This covers the specification of data to be drawn for statistical purposes from administrative systems, and the specification of statistical surveys. It involves agreeing requirements, setting standards and establishing arrangements for minimising the load placed on suppliers of information;
- (vi) *Data Collection:* Once a specification for the statistics is in place, there is a range of activities related to the gathering of the data themselves. Surveys may be conducted or existing administrative data sources may be appropriate. Administrative systems are often relatively cheap to utilise and frequently updated but they do not always follow the definitions and coverage that would be ideal to meet needs for statistics: they are also subject to change as a consequence of changes to the administrative arrangements. Statistics based on administrative systems are therefore supplemented by statistical censuses and surveys, which allow direct measurement of the phenomena about which data are required;
- (vii) *Data Processing:* This covers the processing of collected data up to the stage of creating a validated and well-documented statistical dataset. In the case of administrative data, the activity includes editing and organising the data to create a resource that may be used for analysis;
- (viii) *Public Release:* The public release of statistics as soon as processing has reached the stage that the statistics are fit for purpose. It encompasses the provision of objective and impartial commentary, and giving access to a properly documented data set enabling others to undertake their own secondary analysis;
- (ix) *Value-added Statistical Services:* Provision of additional analysis and commentary, often drawing on a wide range of sources;
- (x) *International activities:* Contributing to and influencing decision-making in the international arena and contributing to development of statistical services overseas.

3. Statistical Outputs

The main outputs are published statistics and statistical advice given to support policy work. The published statistics - in press releases, books and increasingly electronic media such as disks and databases - cover all areas of our national life, for example, the economy, employment, population, crime, education and health.



Compendium publications from the GSS draw together information on a particular topic from a range of sources, including those outside the GSS (for example the Bank of England), with the aim of offering a clear, objective and impartial statistical picture to help inform debate and decision-making. Some of the most well-known and well-used of these include *Social Trends*, *Regional Trends*, *Population Trends*, *Financial Statistics*, *Monthly Digest of Statistics* and the *Annual Abstract of Statistics*. The *Guide to Official Statistics* describes these and other outputs in more detail.

Work is being taken forward to establish an integrated database system available through the Internet providing access to a comprehensive catalogue of official statistics and a route map from the catalogue to the statistics themselves.

Properly documented data sets are made available, subject to safeguarding confidentiality, to enable others to undertake their own analyses.

Statistics are made available as soon as processing has reached the stage that the statistics are fit for purpose and key statistics are made available to all users at the same time, with limited exceptions only on a strict need-to-know basis: information about exceptions is publicly available. Release dates for these statistics are pre-announced.

4. Accountability and Governance

Each department is responsible for its own statistical programmes, and is accountable to Parliament for these programmes through its Ministers.

Statistical programmes are prepared by statistical staff within a policy and resources framework determined by the Minister. User and supplier interests are taken into account through formal advisory bodies, through less formal discussions with representative organisations such as user groups and trade associations, and through other mechanisms. One advisory body - the Statistics Advisory Committee - has been established to provide advice across a broad spectrum of work. It advises the Director of ONS on the work of ONS and also on the Director's responsibilities as Head of the GSS. Its members are customers, data suppliers and others with appropriate knowledge acting in a personal capacity.

Ministers are responsible for approving the work programmes and providing appropriate professional freedom to staff to prepare and implement these programmes. The *Official Statistics Code of Practice*¹⁷ sets out good practices for producers of statistics in this respect.

ONS, being an Agency, has a Framework Document in which the roles and responsibilities of the Minister and of the Director are formally specified:

- (a) Chancellor of the Exchequer: The Chancellor of the Exchequer is accountable to Parliament for all the activities of the Office (except those for which the Director, in his/her role as Registrar General for England and Wales, is accountable elsewhere) and for the resources allocated to it, but will not normally become involved in the day-to-day management of the Office. The Chancellor is responsible for, among other things:
- agreeing the role and objectives of ONS
 - determining the resources allocated to the Office
 - approving annually a rolling three year business plan

¹⁷ *Official Statistics Code of Practice*. (1995). CSO.

- setting annual corporate targets
- reviewing annually performance against the targets
- appointing the Director
- bringing legislation before Parliament
- deciding the scope and governance of the RPI, referring issues to the RPI Advisory Committee as appropriate
- approving appointments to the Statistics Advisory Committee and non-executive appointments to the Management Board
- ensuring that the Office is able to operate in accordance with the Framework Document and that the Director has the freedom to maintain and demonstrate the integrity of its output
- deciding the most appropriate way to respond to Parliamentary Questions and letters from Members of Parliament about the Office
- deciding whether the Director should appear at departmental Select Committee hearings.

(b) Director: The Director is responsible for the **operation** of the Office in accordance with its aims, objectives and functions, consulting the Chancellor of the Exchequer on proposals which impinge on matters of government policy. Key aspects include:

- promoting public confidence in the professional independence of the Office
- definitions and methods used by the Office (although the scope and definition of the Retail Prices Index continue to be matters for the Chancellor)
- making statistics about the economy and society readily available and for maximising the use of official statistics subject to the need to recover the costs of dissemination; deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by the Office
- agreeing with departments concordats, service level agreements and agreements concerning data supply
- minimising the burdens on those who supply data to the Office
- protecting the confidentiality of people and organisations from the unauthorised disclosure of information held about them by the Office
- making appointments, with the agreement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the Statistics Advisory Committee and non-executive appointments to the Management Board.

The Director also has responsibilities for **planning** and **reporting**. Key aspects are:

- preparing a three-year business plan which will be updated annually and submitted for approval by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It will inform discussion of the resource requirements of the Office in the annual Public Expenditure Survey and will be revised as necessary to reflect its outcome

- providing the Chancellor of the Exchequer with an annual report assessing performance
- preparing an Annual Report and Accounts to be laid before Parliament.

The Role of the Head of the GSS

The Director of the ONS has no management responsibility for the work of the GSS outside of ONS. However, in his/her role as the head of the GSS, the Director does have a role to promote co-ordination. The Head of the GSS, as the government's chief adviser on statistics, has responsibilities to:

- (i) promote the provision across government of co-ordinated, high quality, cost-effective and easily accessible statistics;
- (ii) promote the integrity and validity of official statistics and maintain a code of practice (the GSS operates in accordance with the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*);
- (iii) facilitate the development of methodologies, classifications and standards, and information systems;
- (iv) facilitate the development of dissemination and marketing arrangements for official statistics;
- (v) ensure an effective contribution is made to international statistical developments;
- (vi) advise departments on the range and quality of official statistics and matters relating to organisation and value for money;
- (vii) advise departmental Heads of Profession for statistics in the provision of accurate and relevant statistics;
- (viii) resolve interdepartmental disputes over statistical matters;
- (ix) advise departments on the design and conduct of government statistical surveys to businesses including the means to minimise compliance costs for survey respondents.

The Head of the GSS is also the Head of Profession for government statisticians and is responsible for maintaining central personnel and staff development functions to enhance the availability of skilled professional statisticians across government.

In discharging all these responsibilities, the Head of the GSS works in consultation with departmental Heads of Profession for statistics whose own roles and responsibilities in this respect are documented¹⁸. He provides an annual report to the Prime Minister on these matters. This report is published.

A number of functions located within ONS support the Head of the GSS: planning; policy; personnel; training; international co-ordination; statistical methods; computing; survey control; marketing and customer services.

¹⁸ Available from Policy and Planning Division, Office for National Statistics, 1 Drummond Gate, London SW1V 2QQ.

These functions, and other inter-departmental activities, are in turn co-ordinated through a range of GSS committees. The GSS Policy and Management Committee is chaired by the Head of the GSS and comprises other senior members of the GSS. There are nine standing sub-committees which support the main committee by developing policy for, and co-ordination of, outputs (eg. GSS Social Statistics Committee) and processes (eg. GSS Methods Committee).

Professionalism and Quality Assurance

This is vital to the quality of, and public confidence in, official statistics. Key aspects include:


- departmental Heads of Profession for statistics have a role to promote best practice in statistical work throughout their department, in particular observance of the *Official Statistics Code of Practice*, and to ensure overall quality of service.
- Methods and Quality Division, located within ONS and assisted by external advisers where appropriate, undertakes methodological development for ONS and additionally provides advice across the GSS. The GSS Methods Committee, which includes external experts, co-ordinates methodological development across the GSS.
- Survey Control Unit (SCU), located within ONS, assesses each proposed new GSS statistical survey of businesses or local authorities, and ensures each survey is formally reviewed every three to five years. Review teams comprise users and data suppliers and often an external adviser. Review reports are published.
- new developments are aired through review panels, advisory and user groups, and professional bodies such as the Royal Statistical Society.
- methods underpinning the collection, processing and analysis of statistics are published.
- the maintenance and sharing of high common standards is promoted through the recruitment process, statistical training for staff and through mechanisms allowing staff to move widely throughout their careers.

Statutory Framework

Most major countries have an administrative Statistics Law, which defines the role and responsibilities of the official statistical service and which provides the framework for compulsory surveys and for statistical confidentiality. In the UK, there are a number of Acts of Parliament specific to statistics, of which the most significant are the Census Act 1920, the Population Statistics Act 1938, the Statistics of Trade Act 1947 and the Agricultural Statistics Act 1979. In addition, there are a number of other Acts relating to, for example, employment, finance, local government and planning, which contain provisions for the collection of information.

The UK is also affected by European legislation in this field. For example, in the interests of harmonising statistical outputs within the European Union there is specific legislation governing the production of product sales statistics and intra-EC trade statistics. At a higher level, a new European Union regulation - the "EU Statistics Law"¹⁹ - was approved in February 1997 that covers all output included in the Community Statistical Programme. There is significant common ground between this Programme, whose aim is to provide the

¹⁹ Council Regulation (EC) No 322/97 of 17 February 1997 on Community Statistics. *Official Journal of the European Communities* No L 52, 22.2.97, pp1-7.



statistics required for the formulation, application, monitoring and assessment of Community policies, and the output of UK official statistics. Participants in this Programme are legally bound to ensure that their output is produced in an objective and independent manner; they must be scientific in selecting techniques, definitions and methodologies; and they must minimise burdens on respondents and ensure that the overall costs of the statistical work are in proportion to the benefits it is likely to offer. All these principles are already enshrined in the UK's *Official Statistics Code of Practice*, but the regulation means that it is now possible for these aspects of statistical work to be challenged in court.

ANNEX C: UNITED NATIONS FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS²⁰

The Statistical Commission,

Bearing in mind that official statistical information is an essential basis for development in the economic, demographic, social and environmental fields and for mutual knowledge and trade among the States and peoples of the world,

Bearing in mind that the essential trust of the public in official statistical information depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles which are the basis of any democratic society which seeks to understand itself and to respect the rights of its members,

Bearing in mind that the quality of official statistics, and thus the quality of the information available to the Government, the economy and public depends largely on the cooperation of citizens, enterprises and other respondents in providing appropriate and reliable data needed for necessary statistical compilations and on the cooperation between users and producers of statistics to meet users' needs,

Recalling the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations active in statistics to establish standards and concepts to allow comparisons among countries,

Recalling also the International Statistical Institute Declaration of Professional Ethics,

Having expressed the opinion that resolution C(47), adopted by the Economic Commission for Europe on 15 April 1992, is of universal significance,


Noting that, at its eighth session, held at Bangkok in November 1993, the Working Group of Statistical Experts, assigned by the Committee on Statistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to examine the Fundamental Principles, had agreed in principle to the ECE version and had emphasized that those principles were applicable to all nations,

Noting also that, at its eighth session held in Addis Ababa in March 1994, the Joint Conference African Planners, Statisticians and Demography considered that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are of universal significance,

Adopts the present principles of official statistics:

1. Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information.

²⁰ Source: United Nations Economic and Social Council. 1994. Report of the Special Session of the Statistical Commission (New York, 11-15 April 1994), E/1994/29.

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2. To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.
 3. To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics.
 4. The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.
 5. Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.
 6. Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.
 7. The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.
 8. Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.
 9. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all levels.
 10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.

ANNEX D: ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR STATISTICS IN OTHER COUNTRIES²¹

Australia

The system is highly centralised. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was established by the Statistics Act (1975). The head of ABS is appointed by the Governor General. ABS constitutes the central statistical authority for the Australian government and provides statistical services for the state governments. There is also a statistics advisory council which coordinates and advises on statistical services provided for public purposes.

Austria

The Central Statistical Office (ÖSTAT), established by the Federal Statistics Act (1965), is highly centralised. It is attached to the Federal Chancellery in personnel and budgetary matters, but independent in the field of statistical methodology. The Central Statistical Commission (CSC) advises on priorities, surveys and acts as a mediator between producers and consumers of statistics.

Belgium

A centralised statistical service was created in 1939 by Royal Decree. A number of separate statistical activities were subsequently created, and in 1985 the National Institute of Statistics (INS) was given a coordinating role for the national statistical system rather than being a centralised office. INS is a department of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The High Council of Statistics advises the INS on methods of research, and the King in the fields of regulations and obligations governing statistical work.


Canada

A largely centralised system, served by the national statistical office, Statistics Canada, was established by the Statistics Acts (1970-81). Its head is the Chief Statistician of Canada, who acts as deputy to the Minister of Supply and Services. The Statistics Canada budget is authorised by Parliament on the advice of the Treasury. There is also a National Statistical Council to advise on the programmes of Statistics Canada.

Denmark

Most official statistics are produced centrally by the independent Statistics Denmark (DS) whose activities are governed by the 1971 Statistics Act. There are a few exceptions; statistics on fisheries, health, environment and research and development are produced by

²¹ It is not possible in these short summaries to convey the full extent of centralisation/decentralisation in each country. In most countries, policy-related work for Ministers tends to be decentralised, while most, but by no means all, data collection, analysis and publication is centralised. Much of the information for this annex has been drawn from the *Handbook of Official Statistics in ECE Member Countries*, published in 1995 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Netherlands information has been updated to take account of a new Statistics Law passed in 1996. Information for Spain has been taken from the 1989 Statistics Law. Information for Australia and New Zealand has been drawn from their respective 1975 Statistics Acts.



the ministries concerned in cooperation with DS. The Director General, assisted by the Board of Directors, is responsible for the extent to which DS uses its data collection authority, decides on the work programme and approves the budget before its submission to the Minister of the Economy.

Finland

Statistics Finland (SF) is an independent and relatively centralised government agency set up under the Ministry of Finance following the Act on Statistics Finland (1992). The Director general is appointed by the President of Finland and is a member of the Board, the highest decision-making body. SF is responsible for the compilation of most official statistics, although several other government agencies compile statistics in their fields. SF is independent in its professional activities and may freely decide on the publication of its results and contents of its publications.

France

The French system of official statistics is relatively decentralised, with statistical services in several ministries and many public or semi-public agencies. The central agency, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), set up by Act of Parliament (1946), has a coordinating function. The National Council of Statistical Information (CNIS), chaired by the Minister of Economic Affairs, ensures consultation between producers and users of official statistical information, advises on different aspects of statistical activities and reports on its functions.

Germany

Official statistics in Germany are predominately federal, with statistical work concentrated in the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) and the Land Statistical Offices (LSO). The FSO's authority comes from the Act on Statistics for Federal Purposes (revised 1987). Some statistics are produced by other agencies. The President of the FSO is Chairman of an advisory committee, which advises the FSO on fundamental questions of statistics. The FSO is independent in methodological and scientific matters.

Greece

Following the Statistics Law of 1956, the Greek statistical system is centralised with almost all major government statistical work conducted at the General Secretariat of the National Statistical Service of Greece (NSSG). The NSSG is an independent agency reporting to the Minister of National Economy, who decides on the work programme of the NSSG, either alone or with other ministers. The implementation of the work programme is the responsibility of NSSG.

Ireland

The Central Statistical Office (CSO) is responsible for the collection, compilation, processing and dissemination of most statistics. There is no regional or functional decentralisation. Authority comes from the 1993 Statistics Act. The CSO is attached to the Department of the Taoiseach, but has independence in the statistical methodology and professional statistical standards used, the content of statistical releases and publications and the timing and methods of dissemination used. There is a National Statistics Board which guides, with the agreement of the Taoiseach, the strategic direction of the Office and in particular establishes priorities.

Italy

The criteria and guiding principles of the Italian statistical service were legally revised in 1988. Official statistics in Italy are largely decentralised. The National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), has overall coordination of the National Statistical System (SISTAN). The budget of ISTAT is approved by the Cabinet Office, but it is legally and administratively autonomous. The Commission for the Protection of Statistical Information monitors the impartiality and comprehensiveness of statistical work, the quality of statistical methods and data-processing techniques, and compliance with EU and international directives.

Luxembourg

The Central Service for Statistics and Economic Studies (STATEC) was set up by an Act of 1962 as part of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Under basic law, STATEC is the only body competent to carry out or authorize statistical enquiries, it also has to coordinate from a technical point of view the statistical information provided by other organisations. A High Council of Statistics, established by an Act of 1971, advises on the annual programme of STATEC.

Netherlands

The Dutch system of official statistics is completely centralised at the national level, with nearly all information compiled and published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). The 1996 Statistics Law, superseding the Royal Decree of 1899, provides the legal basis. The CBS is the responsibility of the Minister for Economic Affairs, but is completely independent in its statistical activities. The Director General prepares a work programme for approval by the Central Commission of Statistics, whose members are appointed by Royal Decree. Implementation of the programme is the sole responsibility of the Director General of the CBS.

New Zealand

The Department of Statistics established by the Statistics Act (1975) is under the direction of the Government Statistician appointed by the Minister of Statistics. The department is responsible for the collection and preparation of official statistics and for the coordination of statistical projects carried out by other departments of state.

Norway

Norway has a centralised system of official statistics run by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) set up by the Statistical Act of 1907, revised in 1989. The Bureau is headed by a Board and a Director General. The Board decides the work programme, draft budget and annual report proposed by the Director-General and places these before the Ministry. The budget is approved by Parliament. There is no Statistical Commission to advise the Director. The CBS is an independent government agency, subordinate to the Ministry of Finance in budgetary matters only.

Portugal

The national statistical system (SEN) consists of the Higher Statistical Council (CSE) and the National Statistical Institute (INE), and was established by the 1989 Statistics Law. The INE has the exclusive responsibility for collecting, processing, coordinating and disseminating statistical data, however it may delegate these functions to other public organisations. The INE belongs to the Ministry of Equipment, Planning and Territorial Administration, but constitutes an autonomous body. The Minister approves the work programme in accordance with general guidelines issued by the CSE.



Spain

The Spanish system of official statistics is underpinned by the 1989 Statistics Law. The National Institute for Statistics (INE) is at the heart of the system, coordinating activities with the statistics departments of individual ministries and regional authorities. It is an autonomous agency attached to the Ministry of Economy and Finance. INE formulates, in cooperation with decentralised parts of the system, the draft National Statistical Plan. The Higher Statistical Council, chaired by the Minister and comprising a representative range of users and suppliers, gives a binding opinion on the draft plan.

Sweden

Swedish official statistics are decentralised, with each government agency having responsibility for statistics relating to its area of interest. The central agency, Statistics Sweden (SCB) has a coordinating role. Production of official statistics is regulated by a general statistics act from 1992. The Scientific Council has a consultative function for SCB and is responsible for certain projects and there are other committees specific to particular areas.

United States of America

The United States has a decentralised statistical system. Several departments of the federal government have statistical agencies within them, and there are 60 other federal agencies who publish statistics. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the Executive Office of the President is responsible for statistical policy and coordination. There are also many separate statutes authorising or requiring different statistics to be collected and published. Various Congressional committees oversee the activities of the OMB and the Committee on National Statistics of the National Academy of Sciences also provides advice.

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